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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)
SUBJECT: SARG REPORTEDLY SETS OUT THREE NEW RED LINES FOR
CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: DAMASCUS 01108

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: A recent newspaper article in the influential regional Arab daily al-Hayat reported what is described as the SARG's demarcation of three "new" red lines for civil society activists, reflecting the regime's reaction to events of the last week. The three lines include: a ban on connections with foreign powers or participation in opposition conferences abroad; a ban on street demonstrations; and a ban on reporters publishing news relating to security and military operations. In addition, the decision by an investigatory judge to prosecute Kamal Labwani on much more severe charges than originally sought, as well as other recent developments, seems to be a clear signal that the SARG is hardening its position. This "re-coloring" of long-standing redlines is already having an impact, as the SARG has begun to formally clamp down on our interaction with long-time contacts. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) AL-HAYAT ARTICLE LAYS OUT THREE RED LINES FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS: A March 13 al-Hayat article by Ibrahim Hamidi reports the existence of three new SARG-imposed red lines for civil society activists: a prohibition on contact with foreign governments (and a ban on participation in opposition conferences abroad); a ban on "tangible action" in the street (understood to mean sit-ins and other demonstrations); and a ban on reporters publishing news relating to security and military forces (other than official statements.) Each reported red line appears linked to sets of specific recent events: the foreign government contacts/foreign conference ban seems to be a response to the Syrian National Congress meeting in Washington, the Aspen Institute meeting in Paris, and smaller human rights training sessions recently held in Amman, as well as to the European Commission-funded Civil Society Training Center (primarily a human rights center, now closed by the SARG) and the recent announcement of USD five million in MEPI funding for civil society projects. The street demonstration ban (which has, in fact, been in effect and rigorously enforced for years as part of the Emergency Law's limitations on freedom of assembly) is meant to serve as a reminder of the prohibition, in the wake of the demonstrations held March 9 and 12 by opposition members. The press ban on covering military and security issues seems to represent a follow-up SARG response to an an-Nahar article on Syrian Military Intelligence reorganization. The SARG has already enforced these red lines in recent weeks in actions ranging from closing the EC Training Center to violently quelling the two peaceful demonstrations, to arresting a number of activists, including the Damascus-based an-Nahar journalist who wrote the SMI article (ref A).

13. (C) SARG MAKING EXAMPLES OUT OF QURRABI AND LABWANI: The SARG has also been quick to make examples out of two activists who have participated in conferences and discussions abroad. Arab Human Rights Organization spokesman Ammar Qurrabi was detained by SMI upon his return to Syria, after attending opposition conferences in the U.S. and Paris, and was released several days later. Meanwhile, Kamal Labwani, imprisoned since his November return from a visit to the U.S. and Europe, now faces new legal charges that are much more serious than the crimes with which he was originally charged. Labwani's lawyer, Anwar al-Bunni, told Poloff that the investigatory judge has decided to charge Labwani with the offense of having contact with a foreign power and encouraging the foreign power to invade Syria, a charge which potentially carries a life sentence. Bunni added that if the foreign power does indeed invade Syria, Labwani could face execution. The SARG "wants to use him as a bargaining chip with the U.S.," commented Bunni. In a March 14 discussion, Labwani's wife and three children, who had visited him that same day, told Poloff that Labwani had been willing to "pay the price" of three or four years in prison for engaging in discussions with the U.S., but that 20 years to life was a grim prospect and possibly more than he could bear.

14. (C) The Labwani family now fears that the new charges will paint Kamal as a traitor in eyes of the Syrian public and bring to an end to any democratic opening he had created by challenging the SARG. The Labwanis asked that the USG "softly but firmly" press the SARG on their father's behalf via diplomatic channels and attempt to have the charges reduced. At the same time, they warned that pressing the government too hard (either in diplomatic discussions or via public statements) would cause the SARG to overestimate

Labwani's value to the USG and see him as a useful pawn for bargaining purposes. They also encouraged the USG to indirectly influence regional Arab media in making clear to the Syrian public that Labwani had brought a message against military intervention to the U.S.

15. (C) INDICATIONS OF SARG ENFORCEMENT OF RED LINES REFLECTED IN POST INTERACTIONS: The enforcement of the new red lines mirrors new efforts by the SARG to restrict both travel and interactions with Syrian contacts by mission staff. For example, MFA protocol officials insisted recently that visiting Syria Desk Officer Sita Sonty could not meet with certain Syrian contacts (e.g. Sheikh Salah Kuftaro, the head of the Abu Noor Institute) until the MFA received a diplomatic note and formally approved each meeting. In the end, the MFA did not respond to the submitted dipnote request for the meeting and informally informed us and Kuftaro that the meeting was prohibited without such approval. Subsequently, the MFA informed Kuftaro that he should not meet with any Embassy officials, without approval from the MFA.

16. (C) COMMENT: With its aggressive new re-coloring of red lines and the iron-fisted reactions to recent events, the SARG has made its new standard clear to any challengers. This cementing of a clear anti-opposition stance, combined with what was seen here as a weak UNIIIC interim report, will only serve to increase the level of fear among civil society activists and other opposition figures and their reluctance to deepen their relationships with the USG. While a few brave souls may still pursue MEPI funding, this new environment will make the actual implementation of in-country projects all the more difficult. The public re-assertion of red lines also sends the message that the SARG feels emboldened by its confrontational posture regarding Hamas, Iran, Lebanon, and the "Mohammed caricatures" controversy, and feels that the sustained spike in violence in Iraq has distracted the U.S. and provided the regime with an opportunity to hit back hard at an opposition/civil society movement encouraged by signals of support from Washington in order to remind activists of the limits of their foreign protectors. END COMMENT.

